

Updated Facts on the Health Dangers from Lead Exposure

April 2016

Levels of lead once thought harmless can cause serious health problems.



Health damage can occur from lead exposure below the limits regulated by OSHA:

- Damage can be permanent.
- Damage can be occurring even if you have no symptoms.
- Damage (effects) may not show up until many years later.
- Damage could be to your family if you carry lead dust into your car or home.

What health damage can even low levels of lead cause?

Studies in recent years show that low levels of lead in adults can:

- Increase blood pressure-may increase your chances of having a heart attack or stroke
- Decrease brain function, making it more difficult to think, learn, and remember
- Harm the physical and mental development of your baby before it is born
- Increase chances of having a miscarriage
- Damage almost any part of your body, including your kidneys, blood, brain, and nerves.

What level of lead in your blood is harmful from a medical point of view?

- Scientists and doctors are now recommending that all adults keep their blood lead exposure below 5 micrograms per deciliter ($\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$).
- Pregnant women, those planning to get pregnant, or women who are breastfeeding should not have a blood lead level of 5 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$ or higher.

If you work* with lead on the job, around the home, or doing a hobby you need to:

- Find out how much lead is in your blood by having a periodic blood lead test
- Talk to your doctor about lead and your health
- Take steps to protect your health

*Common jobs with lead exposures in Iowa are manufacturing involving metals, construction & renovation, industrial resurfacing or painting, metal and electronics recycling, and radiator repair or vehicle body work. Shooting and ammunition casting or reloading are also common exposures.

What should I tell my doctor?

Your doctor or medical provider needs to know if you work with lead. Your doctor can order a blood lead test to monitor your exposure. Tell the doctor:

- What you do at work or home that exposes you to lead.
- How long you have been working with lead.
- If you think working with lead is making you sick.
- If you have any hobbies or part-time jobs that could expose you to lead.
- If you had any lead jobs or hobbies in the past.
- If you have ever had a blood lead test and what the result (number) was if you know.
- If you were ever moved to a different job or had to be off work because your lead level was high.
- Women should also tell their doctor if they are pregnant or thinking about becoming pregnant.

You may have a medical condition that makes you more sensitive to the harmful effects of lead. Ask the doctor if you have any medical conditions that may make you more sensitive to the effects of lead even at low levels, such as:

- High blood pressure
- Kidney diseases
- Brain or nervous system diseases
- Other health problems or pregnancy

What can I do to protect myself and my family?

Get a blood lead test at least every 6-12 months, either through work or through your private medical provider if you are exposed to lead at work, at home or with hobbies.

- How often you should get tested depends on the type of job you do, your hobbies, and your health. The more lead involved means the more risk of exposure and can increase how often you should get tested.
- Depending on your blood lead level result, you may need to get repeat tests more often.

Ask your doctor if you need any follow-up medical tests not done routinely by your employer to see if lead is affecting your health or the health of your family, such as:

- Blood pressure check or other heart function tests
- Kidney function tests
- Cognitive evaluation (how you think, process information, make decisions)
- Lead tests for family members
- Other tests

Make sure you don't accidentally swallow lead.

- Wash your hands and face with soap and water before eating, drinking and before leaving work.
- Do not eat, drink, or smoke in the work area.
- Keep your work area clean. Best: wet clean (soapy water) methods to wipe down surfaces, and mop or HEPA vacuum the shop floor daily.

Make sure you don't take home lead to your family.

- Take a shower and wash your hair (including facial hair) at work before you go home if possible.
- Change into clean clothes and shoes at work, and keep dirty work clothes and shoes away from clean street clothes.
- If you can't shower and change at work before going home, you can still:
 - Wash your face, hands and arms with soap and water before you leave.
 - Change your work shoes and store them in a plastic bag or plastic tote in your trunk before getting into your car or truck.
 - Ask if you can wear a washable coverall over your work clothes, and leave it at work. If a coverall isn't an option, change shirts before you get in your vehicle and put your dirty shirt with your work shoes in the trunk.
 - Shower as soon as you get home.
 - Wash your work clothes separate from the rest of the family's laundry.

Do what you can to lower the amount of lead you breathe in.

- If you have local exhaust ventilation, turn it on and position it correctly while you work with lead.
- Talk to your employer about wearing a respirator while you work with lead. If you already wear a respirator, ask whether there is another type of respirator that will protect you better. Talk to your safety officer to ask if your employer will pay to have a doctor evaluate whether you can wear one safely. A fit-test is required to make sure that a respirator fits you well.

Work with your employer to make the work place safer.

- If your blood lead test is elevated or you have concerns about lead exposure at work, talk to your safety officer - there are often ways to change your work process that will reduce the amount of lead in the air or on surfaces, even if the exposure is less than the amounts currently regulated by OSHA.
- Companies can ask for help to determine the risks and possible solutions for making the workplace safer. Contact the IDPH ABLES program for more information.

**Iowa Department of Public Health
Adult Blood Lead Epidemiology & Surveillance Program (ABLES)
800-972-2026 or <http://idph.iowa.gov/lpp/surveillance>**

